

# **THE LEADERSHIP ACADEMY**

**2001**

## **THE SCHOOL PORTFOLIO IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS**

### **Common Threads**

When gathering information about the first four school districts that have partnered with The Leadership Academy, Southwestern Bell, and Education for the Future Initiative to implement the School Portfolio Process, several themes began to emerge. While the school districts and buildings are different, many similarities are apparent. Some of the common threads observed include the following:

- The process is a structured, organized way to frame school improvement efforts.
- The continuums give specific self-assessment areas for collecting and analyzing perceptual data.
- Both building and district educators develop a dual focus on school improvement and student achievement.
- The process encompasses and complements other school improvement efforts and initiatives.
- Teacher dialogue and teacher collaboration increase.
- Leadership is shared at all levels.
- The process presents a starting point for looking at data.
- Educators are able to decide what data are important
- Data analysis allows teachers to adjust instructional strategies.
- Baseline data allows educators to assess where they are and move forward.
- The process fosters establishing measurable goals.
- Data based decision making is promoted.
- The process itself is an ongoing, continuous improvement tool.

As you read the following overviews of the School Portfolio Process from the four Missouri school districts, please look for these common threads. The district and building scenarios are different; yet, they are the same in regard to the School Portfolio Implementation Process. Here are their stories to date:

## Columbia

The School Portfolio story in Columbia began just over two years ago. Dr. Cheryl Cozette, Assistant Superintendent for Elementary Education, reports that Columbia Public Schools were looking at school improvement processes in elementary buildings as the district was going through preparation for MSIP and updating the CSIP. Buildings were involved in reform initiatives such as Accelerated Schools and Basic Schools, for example, and the district sought ways to pull these together in a school improvement model that still allowed such previously chosen processes to be retained.

Dr. Cozette was introduced to *The School Portfolio Implementation Process* through The Leadership Academy. Subsequently, she introduced the process and the work of Dr. Bernhardt to elementary principals through a study group format. The School Portfolio process was quickly viewed as a process that could document what schools were already doing, focus on data, and promote data-driven decision making.

When considering the results achieved to-date through the School Portfolio process, Dr. Cozette cited those of principals focusing on results-based school improvement while giving teachers a format and a framework for looking at data and making decisions collectively for students at both the building and classroom level. Principals and teachers began asking for more data and, thus, changed the focus of assessment programs at the elementary level. Data became the driving force for making instructional decisions.

Gradually, using the new process helped the district begin to view data as a tool to enhance instruction, achievement and program development. A lot of data is not used to “paint a picture” of students, classrooms and the district. Those educators who accepted the premise of the School Portfolio saw the data as a measure of student success. The district has begun to gather data for classroom pictures of student progress, making data more meaningful. The continuums and categories of the School Portfolio have helped “pigeon hole” the data. Dr. Cozette sees the process as a tool for change through the self-assessment process on each of the continuum areas. It has “tremendous potential” for the whole school picture. The challenge has been to get the data organized, so that it is usable--a procedure that takes time, money and energy.

From a professional development perspective, Dr. Mary Anne Graham, Staff Development Coordinator, is positive about the School Portfolio due to support from the Leadership Academy. The partnership and the process foster school improvement. Dr. Graham sees the School Portfolio as a way to help staff formulate goals and work together to improve them. It focuses on measurable goals and has a structure for looking at how schools are doing by analyzing data and making data based decisions. In other

words, we now look at “where are we and where are we going.” As teachers view student data, they begin making changes in their teaching and see changes in student achievement. Use of baseline data allows teachers to know if they are making an impact when looking at future student scores. Dr. Graham believes that the process gives meaning to data. Instead of a “hodge-podge” view, there is a consistent way to look at student achievement that can be replicated from building to building, year to year. According to Dr. Graham, the most important pieces are data analysis and data-based decision making. In her view the School Portfolio provides a structure for how students learn and what to do to improve learning, as well as a way to support building and CSIP goals.

Two Mile Prairie Elementary is a part of the Basic Schools Network that provides a framework to guide school improvement. The framework gives good general objectives to measure the school’s improvement progress according to former principal, Dr. Jack Jensen. This model is a “guide for school improvement” that measures curriculum with coherence, climate, community and character. It was adopted before he knew of Dr. Bernhardt’s work. Dr. Jensen sees the School Portfolio as a complement to the Basic Schools model because the Basic Schools areas are reflected in data categorized in the continuums. The School Portfolio was chosen to augment the Basic Schools model by staff participation in study teams, workshops and book discussion before consensus was reached to adopt and blend the new process with the prior model. Last year the Basic Schools model provided for a student/parent survey on climate, revealing data showing concerns around multiculturalism and safety at dismissal time. This year, with the addition of the new process, decisions were made based on the data. Both concerns were addressed by making changes in programs and dismissal procedures. At Two Mile Prairie, the new process has been used for a year, especially to “evaluate progress” in the continuum areas and to evaluate how the school improvement plan is being implemented. Whereas in the past there were not structured ways to conduct surveys, now there is a more structured approach and the data gained from surveys is used to help “guide school improvement.”

The School Portfolio has been in use for nearly three years at New Haven Accelerated Elementary, reports principal Dr. Terri Martin. New Haven was in a school reform process three years ago as an Accelerated School, but not analyzing data or making decisions based on data. It was decided that the School Portfolio facilitates both procedures and helps manage them. Since the implementation of the process, the school climate has become “student learner centered” and “conversations revolve around student achievement.” A part of the New Haven process is to establish a goal, review the data related to it and establish appropriate benchmarks for it. This procedure helps eliminate ineffective programs. According to Dr. Martin, the School Portfolio has refined the way New Haven educators look at data, helping them decide what data is necessary for student achievement gains. It has given them multiple measures and a way of organizing data and having it make sense. The process has “made life easier” by having the data and the analysis of the data has been “productive” for New Haven. Dr. Martin believes that a major strength of the School Portfolio is that it has united the staff ensuring that all are headed in the same direction while focused on student learning. Teacher morale is

improved because pressure is taken off of any one classroom teacher. Teachers are willing to work together collegially, while looking at data and not feel negative or blameful. Even though instructional approaches vary, results for students are positive and teachers are given credit for good teaching.

After viewing School Portfolio materials, Fairview Elementary Principal, Elaine Hassemer believed that the process was a perfect match for the school. The School Portfolio would “improve the framework already in place” and not add anything new for the teachers. This was key for Ms. Hassemer. The fact that the process appeals to a variety of schools was also a plus for her. While implementing the School Portfolio, the staff was allowed to keep the school vision and move toward it, first impacting the staff, then the students. In an organized way, the school’s educators used data to make decisions that were all tied to the vision. The professionals became more “proactive” in deciding how to improve instruction as they used data in planning and realized the importance of a good data base. The data analysis caused the staff to change its standardized testing, establishing consistent assessments in third and fifth grades. According to Ms. Hassemer, teacher leaders developed and emerged as dialogue changed and “teacher talk” became more student focused. Fairview was named a Blue Ribbon School in May. Mrs. Hassemer says that this honor was one result of the School Portfolio Process. She expressed her belief that with so much information in place from the process, the application took less time to complete. Due to the School Portfolio, the school was “already doing most of what was required.”

## **Wentzville**

When asked why Wentzville R-IV Schools chose Dr. Victoria Bernhardt’s School Portfolio process as a tool for school improvement, Dr. Jody Wood, Assistant Superintendent for Instructional Services, explained that it provided a variety of ways for looking at data using the continuums for self-assessment on professional development, leadership, student achievement etc. The self-assessment results painted a whole picture of the district and gave a starting point for improving what they were doing, as well as illustrated where the consistencies of perceptions were.

In describing the results that have been achieved for staff, Dr. Wood related that teachers look more at data concerning student achievement and quickly align their instruction to address any gaps. One such situation was the realization that not all curricular areas included instruction for selecting constructed responses on tests; therefore, constructed responses became a topic of the district’s professional development program. Preparing the staff resulted in better student preparation. This success was a direct result of looking at data to determine a professional development focus.

In recounting the use of the School Portfolio process at Green Tree Elementary, principal Susan Hladky believes that it was her “good fortune” to see an overview presentation of the process. She noticed many similar things about achievement and data that were being tried at her school. She found the format of the process a good way to use data. Although they only began their efforts last fall, her staff began to focus on key

items like improving instruction and student achievement. They looked at data concerning the environment, curriculum, and pedagogy—concentrating only on what they could control. They used the continuums for organizing the data. In the beginning the staff was leery about the process, but later found it an “opportunity” to respond to the continuums and give focus to the building School Improvement Plan, rather than “shoot in the dark.”

The process has given educators a broader perspective of data, changing the way the Wentzville district looks at data. A review of data from student surveys shocked district educators who learned that students did not feel well prepared. Instead of fostering negative feelings, this discovery opened a dialogue that allowed for student input, an approach that had not been used previously. Subsequently the data challenged teachers to address the situation and ultimately enabled them to do a better job preparing students. According to Dr. Wood, the School Portfolio process has created a situation in which information is shared more readily and changes are made more quickly. Teachers feel good about what they are doing and they have developed a communicative partnership.

Dr. Wood also revealed that the School Portfolio Implementation Process has brought principals and teachers closer as a building team, causing them to look at their own information surrounding various kinds of skills and developing broader leadership at the building level. The leadership is active and shared; the process is considered a “joint venture.” The teams are currently assisting in revisiting and redesigning the vision and mission statement of the buildings. Dr. Bernhardt visited in June. After her visit, building teams began to write their School Improvement Plans, based not only on district and building goals, but also on the self-assessment results from the continuums. Goals and an action plan will be drafted that are especially directed toward student achievement. Dr. Wood and the staff will use open, focused discussions as professional development to move staff toward higher levels on the continuums while implementing the School Improvement Plan.

## **Parkway**

Henry Elementary in the Parkway C-2 District has been working with the School Portfolio process for two years. Principal, Dr. Lynn Pott explained that the early interest in the process came when she attended an awareness session with Dr. Victoria Bernhardt sponsored by The Leadership Academy. She accompanied other staff at a second session and eventually invited Dr. Bernhardt, Education for the Future Initiative, and Judy English, Assistant Director, The Leadership Academy, to present and give remarks at her school. This meeting, hosted by the district, helped all staff feel involved in the process and “valued.” The School Portfolio was chosen because it gave a framework for staff to reflect on where they were and the process seemed like a “logical sequence of steps” for analyzing their situation.

As they began to analyze their building’s data together as a team, staff gave input and developed common understandings. Viewing data differently now, the Henry School

staff looks at what is important for student learning, what will make an impact on their learning, and multiple ways of seeing how students achieve and learn. The staff now asks: “How do we know what we know, and what don’t we know?” The School Portfolio has helped the staff “get a handle” on where they are now by realistically reflecting on the present through the use of data, making them “honest.” Vertical teams were led by professional development groups, which helped them grow—to take the next step. Dr. Pott believes that the School Portfolio is a valuable tool to help the staff evaluate their building, its programs, themselves and their students. Although literacy is the school improvement focus, the staff saw the need for a framework for the whole school and the process gave them that framework.

At Pierremont Elementary Principal, Kathy Cain is “excited” about using the School Portfolio process. It provided a guideline for focusing on what was relevant and meaningful in the building. She calls the School Portfolio an “easy format to follow” with helpful tools such as continuums and surveys. The process has been implemented slowly over the last two years in order to least impact teachers’ time and effort. Although the School Portfolio is “in place,” it will undergo continuous revision as application yields a better understanding of Pierremont for its staff, and as a vision statement and performance goals are developed. Mrs. Cain says that it is too early for specific student results but the process has allowed educators to focus on what data mean and how to use them—especially regarding various groups of students (a large special education population, i.e.), instructional strategies and actions to increase performance. Changes generated by the School Portfolio include math and literacy initiatives, as well as schedule revamping, which provided more collegial time and maximized planning time. Other positives of the process are teachers’ engagement in dialogue, their ownership of school improvement, sharing of leadership roles and the development of individual, as well as collective strengths.

In June, the staff held a Leadership Institute to write goals for next year using the School Portfolio as a framework for support. In August, using a PDC grant, they held a retreat with Dr. Bernhardt to work with building-level data summaries and develop grade specific data. The School Portfolio is viewed as “easy to understand and implement;” offering many choices; and as a “plan of action” with a smorgasbord of items from which to choose. It also supports analyzing data and developing the CSIP’s district goals validated through the School Portfolio process.

Parkway central office staff is very supportive of the School Portfolio Implementation Process. All elementary schools have begun the process and will be using the School IQ Surveys to gather perceptual data at each school. Secondary schools are also showing a high degree of interest in the process.

## Hickman Mills

The School Portfolio process began in the Hickman Mills C-1 District after the superintendent and other district personnel attended a session with Dr. Victoria Bernhardt sponsored by The Leadership Academy. From the Associate Superintendent's viewpoint, Mrs. Debra Nelson remembers the selection of the School Portfolio process during MSIP preparations. After researching next steps to accomplish both the district CSIP and building improvement plans, The School Portfolio Implementation Process made the most sense to district leaders as the process was seen as an organized way to collect data. Mrs. Nelson and other educators were "convinced by the continuums" and how they would help the staff assess themselves on true data and not on feelings.

Others soon began getting interested in the process. For example, Glenda Vinson, Reading Specialist, attended a workshop last year and saw the School Portfolio as a way to get at improving reading results in the district. She realized that viewing the research on what works well and how school staff should be working with data was a deciding factor for her in choosing to work with the process. Last fall, 22 Hickman Mills educators participated in School Portfolio awareness sessions sponsored by The Leadership Academy.

Mrs. Vinson has observed that the process complements the Read to be Ready Grant she received for the district. The grant involves three elementary schools and four teachers per school. As Mrs. Vinson's grant implementation increased, the more she noticed the fit between her work in Reading and the School Portfolio—especially in the areas of data collection and student achievement. The data she collected for the reading grant was easily transferred into the School Portfolio. Mrs. Vinson shared an example of data collection in which the importance of students increasing their amount of reading was examined by looking at who is reading, how much they are reading and what they are reading.

According to Mrs. Vinson, as principals lead data collection, questions are asked around how accessible data is, what data are important, what data are still needed and what conclusions can be drawn. This information helps a building team learn about itself and develop a consensus about where the school is. The School Portfolio helps give a needed focus and provides baseline data, a starting place. In addition Mrs. Vinson sees the School Portfolio as the "big picture" of what is being done in a school. Mrs. Vinson regards the principal's role of supporting collaboration as very important. She describes the School Portfolio as giving a "more coordinated effort" district wide, allowing for flexibility, guidance and balance without being dictatorial. In her words, the School Portfolio Process is "a good way to look at school improvement."

In Mrs. Nelson's opinion, implementation of the School Portfolio has enabled the staff to take a realistic view of their buildings in addition to generating meaningful dialogue across the district. The process brought about a "plan of action," yielding a "process to see a product." Hopefully the result of the School Portfolio for students will be to help them be successful, to see an increase in assessment on the MAP as teachers

use various instructional strategies and good “best practices.” While the Hickman Mills staff knew they were doing a good job, they were always looking for ways to improve and found that the process clarified and organized their data in addition to bringing the staff together. Today educators are excited about the work that they are doing and direction that they are going. The School Portfolio is almost the ‘ultimate’ plan. It is a well-structured way to assess schools; and it involves parents and the community as they work together for school improvement and student success.

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